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Chapter Two

CLIMATIC FACTORS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

FEW regions comparable in size to Southeast Asia have so uniform a temperature régime over the whole area and throughout the year. Apart from those local variations due to altitude, and in Northern Burma and Siam to continental influences from Tibet, Southeast Asia from Lower Burma to Cochinchina and New Guinea has average monthly temperatures which remain within ten degrees or so of 80° F. at all seasons. Symmetry about the Equator and a set of land units thoroughly broken up by water bodies of greater area than themselves account for this uniformity of warmth in time and from place to place, and in turn mean that the broad human and vegetation variations do not correlate closely with variations of warmth from place to place, nor is the rhythm of vegetation and cultivation in the region as a whole set by an annual procession of temperature changes.

The basic rhythm of plants and agriculture through most of Southeast Asia is dominated by rainfall—by its incidence rather than by its volume, though considerable differences in volume make distinct climatic sub-divisions away from the axis of the Equator. Köppen's classification emphasises these climatic differences. In this broken terrain, the pattern of the rainfall and the pattern of its variations within short distances, are set by the wind systems. To understand these is to see the operative factor behind the local differences in rainfall periodicity which very much depend on the aspect of the land masses in relation to the seasonal air currents and to local water areas.

THE WIND RÉGIME

Two similar air masses move across Southeast Asia:

(*a*) The Northern Tropical Air Mass which normally moves from the Tropic of Cancer towards the Equator as the Northeast Trades;

(*b*) The Southern Tropical Air Mass, originating over the Tropic of Capricorn and normally moving towards the Equator as the